

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 8

Issue 5 December 2005

Article 10

12-1-2005

Finding Priscilla's Children: The Roots and Branches of Slavery

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Recommended Citation

(2005) "Finding Priscilla's Children: The Roots and Branches of Slavery," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 5 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol8/iss5/10>

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**New Exhibit:
Finding Priscilla's Children:
The Roots and Branches of Slavery**

New York Historical Society

Press Release by New York Historical Society, 170 Central Park West, New York, NY 10024; www.nyhistory.org. Posted on H-Africa, H-Net Discussion Group (November 2005).



NEW YORK. New York City's first museum, the New-York Historical Society (N-YHS) presents **Finding Priscilla's Children: The Roots and Branches of Slavery**, an exhibition on the poignant story of Priscilla, a 10-year old African girl kidnapped into slavery in 1756, whose exile began in Sierra Leone and ended in Charleston, South Carolina. Using a rare and unbroken document trail that began 249 years ago, scholars have traced Priscilla's origin in Africa, her exile on the middle passage, and her life in bondage in America, allowing an intimate portrait of an enslaved person's life to emerge from the pages of history. Scholars have used this document trail to identify one of Priscilla's modern descendants, an African American woman still living in South Carolina today, who recently made an extraordinary "homecoming" journey back to Sierra Leone.

"Finding Priscilla's Children" opens on November 8, and will be on view through March 5, 2006, at the New-York Historical Society, located at Central Park West and 77th Street, Dr. Louise Mirrer, N-YHS President announced today. "The collections of the New-York Historical Society hold the records of the very slave ship that took Priscilla and were key in helping to trace this family's history," said Mirrer. "This exhibition tells a story that stands for the many lost family histories we will never know."

Very few African Americans can trace their family history for 250 years, and even fewer can identify a specific ancestor from Africa, yet the extraordinary document trail for Priscilla and her descendants enables Mrs. Thomalind Martin Polite of Charleston, Priscilla's 7th generation descendant, to reclaim her heritage. Told for the first time as a museum exhibit, this story begins when Mrs. Polite's ancestor, Priscilla, was purchased by Caleb Godfrey, captain of the slave ship *Hare* owned by Samuel and William Vernon, wealthy merchants of Newport, Rhode Island. The *Hare*'s voyage to South Carolina is one of the best documented in the history of the Atlantic slave trade with the Society's collections holding the most complete record of this ship.

When the *Hare* landed in South Carolina, Henry Laurens, one of the richest planters and slave dealers in Charleston and later an American patriot leader during the Revolutionary War, handled the sale of slaves. According to Laurens' records of the sale -- also in the N-YHS collections -- Elias Ball, a wealthy rice planter, purchased Priscilla and three other children from the *Hare*. South Carolina's staple crop at that period was rice, and Carolina

planters were willing to pay high prices for Africans brought directly from the rice-growing region of West Africa, including Sierra Leone. Priscilla lived on Ball family plantations for the rest of her life, bearing 10 children in slavery, and dying in 1811 at about 65 years of age.

Edward Ball, author of the award-winning book *Slaves in the Family* and a direct descendent of Elias Ball, mined his ancestors' unusually detailed plantation records in the 1990s while researching his book and found enough information to link Priscilla to her modern descendants in South Carolina.

Recently, Joseph Opala, curator of "Finding Priscilla's Children" and a historian at James Madison University in Virginia, found the records of the Hare at the New-York Historical Society that link Priscilla directly to Sierra Leone as well as Henry Laurens' accounts of the sale of the Hare's slaves in Charleston with a specific mention of Elias Ball's purchase of 3 boys and 2 girls for £460.

Thomalind Polite, a 31-year-old children's speech therapist from Charleston, followed the document trail uncovered by Ball and Opala back to her roots in West Africa. In May, 2005 Mrs. Polite spent a week in Sierra Leone at the invitation of that country's government. Sierra Leoneans believed she was bringing Priscilla's spirit back with her, so they called her visit "Priscilla's Homecoming." Mrs. Polite was received by Sierra Leone's president and other top national leaders. She watched scores of musicians and dancers perform in her honor, and was given an African name in a touching sea-side ceremony. She visited the ruins of Bunce Island, the British slave castle where the Hare stopped and may have purchased some of its slaves. And Sierra Leone's most popular music group composed a song in Mrs. Polite's honor with the words: "Rush with the message, go tell it to the people, open the gates, Priscilla's coming home!"

Professor Opala accompanied Mrs. Polite on her journey to Sierra Leone, and worked with a documentary film crew from Charleston headed by Jacque Metz. Although he had witnessed two previous "Gullah homecomings" to Sierra Leone, Opala says this one was different. "The earlier homecomings were also big national events," he said, "and Sierra Leoneans were deeply moved to meet African Americans whose ancestors were taken away from their country centuries ago. But this time, they knew the name of a specific ancestor, and so they talked directly to Priscilla herself, looking at Thomalind, but speaking to the spirit of the child they believed she brought with her. One elderly man poured his heart out, telling the ancestral spirit what her countrymen endured during Sierra Leone's bitter civil war. Priscilla's Homecoming was powerfully emotional. I doubt that any reunion quite this specific will ever take place again for an African American whose ancestors were taken away during the slave trade."

"Finding Priscilla's Children" begins with an imaginary portrait of Priscilla painted by African American artist Dana Coleman from South Carolina. Coleman's portrait morphs a school picture of Mrs. Polite taken at 10 the same age as Priscilla when she was exiled to America and pictures of modern Sierra Leonean children. Coleman created a face that looks like a Sierra Leonean girl, but has a family resemblance to Thomalind. Mrs. Polite

presented the original of Coleman's portrait showing the little girl bound as a slave, but with a strong, resolute face -- to the Sierra Leone National Museum. Records show the Hare's slaves were in poor condition when they arrived in America, the children having died in especially high numbers. Priscilla's survival on the middle passage shows her will to live despite the heavy odds.

The New-York Historical Society exhibit uses period maps and drawings and historical documents to follow the 1755/56 voyage of the Hare from Rhode Island, to Sierra Leone, to South Carolina. The extraordinary 249-year document trail linking Priscilla to her modern descendants is illustrated not just with the original documents in the New-York Historical Society collections, but also with historical documents borrowed from other archives in Rhode Island and South Carolina. Edward Ball and Joseph Opala's work to uncover Priscilla's story is also charted. And Thomalind Polite's recent homecoming to Sierra Leone is portrayed with photographs and souvenirs of her visit exhibited here for the first time.

"Finding Priscilla's Children" also includes a short video that brings Priscilla's story full-circle. Priscilla's last moments in Africa are brought to life with a reconstruction of Bunce Island, the British slave castle in Sierra Leone, as it appeared in the 18th century. Prepared by Joseph Opala and Gary Chatelain, an architectural historian also at James Madison University, this CAD (Computer Assisted Design) image recreates what an African child imprisoned at Bunce Island would see as she was led through the door to the children's prison, past various security gates, and then down the long ramp to the waiting slave ship. The video also contains scenes of Ms. Polite's recent homecoming to Sierra Leone, including her emotional visit to the ruins at Bunce Island.

Joseph Opala, the curator of the exhibit, is an historian who lived in Sierra Leone for 17 years. Mr. Opala is known for his research on the "Gullah Connection," the long historical thread linking the people of Sierra Leone to the Gullah people African Americans who live in coastal South Carolina and Georgia. In the 1980s and 1990s he organized two "Gullah Homecomings" to Sierra Leone. Opala's research has resulted in two documentary films, "Family Across the Sea" (1990) and "The Language You Cry In" (1998). Mr. Opala teaches at James Madison University in Virginia. He has served as an advisor on cultural policy to the Government of Sierra Leone and advisor on African American history to the US National Park Service. Opala has been Scholar-in-Residence at Penn Center in South Carolina and a research fellow at Yale University's Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition.

The New-York Historical Society, one of the country's preeminent educational and research institutions, is dedicated to presenting public programs and fostering research that reveal the dynamism of history and its influence on the world today. Founded in 1804, its mission is to explore the richly layered history of New York City and State and the country, and serve as a national forum for the debate and examination of issues surrounding the making and meaning of history.

New-York Historical Society holds one of the world's greatest collections of historical artifacts, American art, and other materials documenting the history of the United States and New York, and is home to both one of the nation's most distinguished independent research libraries and New York City's oldest museum. The Society's collections include more than 4.5 million American history-related documents, paintings, artifacts, and ephemera. Highlights of these holdings include: an exceptional collection of materials relating to slavery, the Civil War, and reconstruction; all of the original watercolors from John J. Audubon's *Birds of America*; an outstanding collection of 18th century newspapers; an extensive collection of Tiffany glasswork; and far-ranging materials relating to the founding and early history of the nation. The strength and depth of these collections provides a vital foundation for the Society's research and educational initiatives. For a full list of upcoming public programs, please visit .

Related resources: Additional information and online presentations concerning "Priscilla's Homecoming" are available from the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University, at <http://www.yale.edu/glc/priscilla/index.htm>, and the University of South Florida's African Heritage Project, at http://www.africanaheritage.com/Priscillas_Homecoming.asp.